

Themes

Idealism and Despair

“For the Union Dead” celebrates Colonel Shaw for embracing a paradox. Shaw, the poem declares, “rejoices in man’s lovely, / peculiar power to chose life and die.” This “power” is “lovely,” meaning both beautiful and full of love, because an almost Christ-like, self-sacrificial desire motivates his death. The “power” is “peculiar,” meaning both odd and particular to humans. The oddness resides in the fact that Colonel Shaw dies for his principles; his strength does not protect his life. Finally, this power is peculiar to humankind as a full consciousness of the consequences makes Shaw’s actions heroic. He faced the risks consciously.

Lowell also “delights” in these actions. However, “For the Union Dead” repeatedly contrasts the idealism that motivates Shaw with contemporary forms of motivating self-interest. The most persistent contrast is between the Civil War and World War II. In his October 13, 1943, letter to President Roosevelt, Lowell stated his opposition to World War II in language evocative of “For the Union Dead.” Recalling that “members of my family had served in all our wars since the Declaration of Independence,” Lowell characterized America as “prepared to wage a war without quarter or principles.” According to “For the Union Dead,” this lack of mercy and morals characterizes modern warfare, which is waged with weapons indiscriminate and awful as the nuclear bomb. What is lacking is Shaw’s heroic, doomed idealism — his willingness to “to choose life and die.”

Devolution of Humankind

According to “For the Union Dead,” technology works to remake humans into beasts. Early in the poem, the speaker declares, “I often sigh still / for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom / of fish and reptile.” Similarly, the poem often sighs for technology’s ability to blur the boundaries between the “downward ... kingdom / of fish and reptile” and that of humans. A fear that technology devolves humankind fills the poem. For example, the phrases “yellow dinosaur steam shovels were grunting” and “giant finned cars nose forward like fish” both compare inanimate technological products and, implicitly, those who use them to creatures far below humans in the classical, great chain of being: “grunting” beasts or “cowed, compliant fish.”

As humans become more beastly, they also increase their ability to slaughter each other. In a very subtle reference, “For the Union Dead” mentions the Civil War soldiers’ “muskets.” Instead of muskets, modern armies possess atomic bombs. “Space is nearer,” the poem declares, after describing “the blast” that levelled Hiroshima. Accompanying its devolution, humankind’s increased firepower brings it closer to the point of extinction. For Lowell, writing during the Cold War nuclear arms race, the possibility of nuclear war appeared frighteningly real; if carried out, such a war would have completed the task of turning men and women back into beasts.

Public vs. Private Life

The title of “For the Union Dead” announces that the work addresses a public subject: the Civil War’s long and tortured legacy. However, the poem begins with the private, childhood memory of the poet visiting the South Boston Aquarium. By its end, “For the Union Dead” relates this memory to much more public events and places: among them, a memorial to the Union dead, William James’s comments at its dedication, and a photograph of Hiroshima placed in a bank window. This technique of showing how the larger political realities intrude into seemingly private moments distinguishes much of Lowell’s poetry; even when it tells what seems to be a narrowly personal anecdote, his poetry often calls attention to the larger societal, cultural, and historical forces at work.

For example, the third stanza mentions, “One morning last March, / I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized // fence on the Boston Common.” The opening of this sentence is highly conversational; its tone could be employed in a chat with a friend. Yet, as the anecdote unfolds, it becomes clear that it addresses not so much the speaker’s private life, but the scarring of public space. The fence is “barbed and galvanized,” suitable for a prison. Yet this menacing fence guards the Boston Common, a place where public events take place and where people are free to gather. Thus, the image of the speaker “pressed” against the fence stands for the individual isolated from communal space. At fault is “progress,” defined as the need for more parking spaces.

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